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ABSTRACT

Interviews with the parents of 153 randomly selected fifth-grade students in urban and suburban schools in the Chicago (Illinois) area provided the data for addressing two hypotheses: first, that parents' choice among educational alternatives for their children may depend on parental dispositions toward the role of schooling in their children's lives; and second, that these parental dispositions may be products of the parents' socioeconomic backgrounds, the academic abilities of their children, and the sex of their children. Analysis of the data revealed that the higher the educational attainment of parents, the more carefully they considered schools when locating the family residence and the more advanced schooling they expected their children to obtain. The number of contacts with teachers initiated by parents was affected particularly by the parents' educational level and the sex of the child involved; parents of boys initiated a significantly higher number of contacts. The study suggests that the benefits of parental support and involvement accrue most often to boys with higher academic capabilities and better educated parents. Further, patterns of parental choice and involvement seem more likely to maintain the social status quo than to challenge it. (Author/PGD)

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Parents and Sex Equity in Elementary Schools: Parental Preferences, Choice, and Influence as They Relate to the Schooling of Boys and Girls

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PARENTS AND SEX EQUITY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Background: The Issue of Parental Control

Since the 1960s, attitudes toward public schooling have changed. A long-standing loyalty to the ideology and institution of the "common school" is on the wane. Constitutencies once unified in their support of public schools have become fragmented. And public education, traditionally viewed as a public good, is increasingly perceived as a consumer good to be purchased in the market.[1] In the past parents have tended to accept most of the decisions made by school board members and administrators and would appeal to or place pressure on persons who were politically accountable if problems arose. During the last decade, however, unequivocal acceptance of professional judgments has declined, and a general faith in the salutary prospects of political accountability has eroded.

To rememdy the conditions which are thought to cause the growing unrest about public schooling, critics have advanced proposals to make schools more directly accountable to parents by creating markets in schooling which would allow for greater parental choice among school sites and programs and would enhance parental influence on educational policies and practices in the schools their children attend. Although advocates of greater parental control assume that levels of dissatisfaction with public schools are sufficiently high to warrant major reforms of school governance, our empirical base of knowledge concerning the varieties of preferences parents might pursue and the degrees of control differing groups of parents might exercise is so inadequate that most critics can only speculate on the likely outcomes of reform.

One of the most deglected considerations in this controversy is the role of sex equity in the governance of educational systems. Although it

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[1] See David B. Tyack, Michael W. Kirst, and Elizabeth Hansot, "Educational Reform: Retrospect and Prospect," Teachers College Record 81 (Spring 1980):253-55.

is frequently argued that increased parental control would lead to improved schooling for poor and minority children (a question which this research also addresses to some extent), the matter of parental involvement and investment in children's schooling has not been studied in such a way as to consider the possibility that parents may behave differently when the school-age child is a boy rather than a girl. For sure there is an enormous literature on sex-role modeling and stereotyping in the home and the school, and parental investments in the post-secondary schooling of men and women has been under investigation for some time. However, empirical research on the sex of the child as it relates to parental influence on the provision of elementary schooling is minimal and has not found its way into the comprehensive literatures on sex roles or sex equity in education.

This study of parents and children in today's schools can help us understand the relationships of parental background, children's abilities, and the sex of the child to the preferences and investment behavior of parents in current elementary schools and has implications for the schools of the future whether or not their governance becomes more highly decentralized and client-controlled.

Conceptual Framework

In this research I developed a conceptual framework which draws on theoretical formulations in social psychology and economics. The framework is based on two premises: (1) that parental behavior may depend on parental dispositions toward schooling in their children's lives; and (2) that parental dispositions may be the product of parents' socioeconomic background, the academic abilities of their children, and the sex of their children. Each of the three components in this conceptual model has two or three elements; the background factors expected to predict parental dispositions are composed of characteristics of parents and children; the dispositional attributes of parents include both a general value which parents assign to schooling and parental preferences for particular features of schools and classrooms; and the control behavior of parents subsumes their efforts to select schooling

according to some set of personal specifications and their exertion of influence on the provision of schooling in the schools and classrooms where their children are enrolled.

Social Psychological Concepts and Parental Behavior

The linkages among the three sets of factors outlined above are predicted, in part, because differences in family characteristics may distinguish their psychological orientations toward future time and toward a sense of personal efficacy in the decisions and actions they take. Most of the conceptual formulations in this tradition focus on measures of socioeconomic status and do not entertain possible differences in parental orientations which may arise as a result of the sex of their children.

The work of Davis, Havighurst, Schneider, and Lysgaard, among others, suggests that socioeconomic position may determine parental predispositions toward "impulse-following" versus deferred gratification.[1] According to findings which are common in the "time-horizon" literature, parents in lower-class groups tend to exhibit ". . .relative readiness to engage in physical violence, free sexual expression, . . .minimum pursuit of education, low aspiration levels, . . .and short time dependence. . . ." while middle-class parents tend to feel that they "should save, postpone, and renounce a variety of gratifications."[2] Differences in future-time orientations may affect parental dispositions and behavior related to their children's schooling in the following manner. Parents of higher socioeconomic status who are future-oriented may assign a higher value to their children's future schooling than parents of lower socioeconomic status; such parents may also involve themselves more often in selecting schools and interacting with teachers on the assumption that such activities will increase the likelihood of their children's future educational success.

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[1] Allison Davis and Robert J. Havighurst, "Social Class and Color Differences in Child-Rearing," American Sociological Review 11 (December 1946):698-710; Louis Schneider and Sverre Lysgaard, "The Deferred Gratification Patterns: A Preliminary Study," American Sociological Review 18 (April 1953):147-49.

[2] Sverre Lysgaard, "Social Stratification and the Deferred Pattern," Proceedings, World Congress of Sociology, Liege, International Sociological Association, 1953, p. 142 (author's emphasis).

A second conceptual development in social psychology--Kohn's work on social class and personal efficacy[1]--suggests that parental social class background may relate to parental preferences for characteristics of their children's instruction as well as parental control behavior. Kohn postulated that higher educational attainment leads to greater intellectual flexibility, analytic ability, and broader perspective, and concluded that "the essence of higher class position /higher educational attainment and higher occupational position/ is the expectation that one's decisions and actions can be consequential; the essence of lower class position is the belief that one is at the mercy of forces and people beyond one's control, beyond one's understanding."[2] As a result Kohn found that lower-class parents tended to value conformity to external authority while middle-class parents tended to value the exercise of self-direction. From these elements in Kohn's work I drew the following hypotheses: given a relationship between educational attainment and intellectual flexibility, more highly educated parents will prefer greater curricular variety in their children's school programs more often than less well educated parents; parents of higher socioeconomic status who are more self-directed due to their own educational experiences and occupational conditions will prefer that their children's instruction be organized around the individual child and that children be encouraged to participate in decisions about the substance of learning and the manner in which it is pursued; and more highly educated and occupationally self-directed parents will tend to make informed choices of their children's schools and will maintain contact with teachers, expecting that their decisions and actions will be consequential.

Although the social psychological literature on sex roles and their antecedants is considerable, the results of empirical investigations has rendered many of their conceptual underpinnings questionable at best.[3] Moreover, the most recent trend among sex role and sex equity studies of younger children has been to concentrate on the role identity of children as it is influenced by peers rather than adults. As a result, this study's investigation of relationships between the sex of the child and his or her

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[1]Melvin L. Kohn, Class and Conformity: A Study in Values, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

[2]Ibid., p. 189.

[3]See, for example, Jean Stockard, et al. Sex Equity in Education (New York: Academic Press, 1980), chapter 3.

parents' preferences, expectations, and behaviors is more inductive and less conceptually based than the examination of parental background and child's ability.

The Economic Theory of Human Capital and Parental Behavior

Social psychological concepts of future-time orientation and personal efficacy underlie the approach relating socioeconomic characteristics of parents to their dispositions and behavior regarding their children's schooling. The economic theory of investment in human capital supports the additional proposition that differences in children's academic abilities may also influence the value parents assign to their children's schooling, the preferences they hold for curricular variety and instructional methods, and the control they exercise through school selection and contacts with teachers. According to Schultz, the theory of investment in human capital

> . . . rests on the proposition that there are certain expenditures (sacrifices) that are made deliberately to create productive stocks . . . that provide services over future periods. These services consist of producer services revealed in future earnings and of consumer services that accrue to the individual as satisfactions over his lifetime.[1]

Investment in human capital, as in physical capital, is likely to be greater when the expected returns on investments are higher.

In the context of schooling, human capital theory supports the proposition that parents will make greater investments of their own time and money to provide academic services to their children who exhibit greater academic capabilities than to their children who are less able.[2] Parents are more likely to assign a higher value to present and future schooling and to commit their time and money to support additional learning for a child who demonstrates a capacity to readily improve his or her intellectual abilities, expecting that the costs which the parents or child may incur will result in higher returns in the form of learning success and monetary benefits for

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[1] Theodore W. Schultz, "Fertility and Economic Values," in Economics of the Family: Parents, Children, and Human Capital, ed. Theodore W. Schultz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 6.

[2] Similarly, parents would be expected to support athletic programs, out-of-school sports, and sport lessons for the child who is athletically talented.

the child and psychic benefits with possible monetary returns for the household.[1] Furthermore, human capital theory suggests that the ability of children may affect their parents' dispositions toward characteristics of present schooling. Parents of more able children are likely to prefer more varied schooling experiences and more individualized treatment than are parents of less able children. Parents are presumed to be aware that the more able child has greater opportunities for applying previous learning to wider varieties of new learning.[2] This proposition incorporates the further assumption that the more able child may develop his or her intellectual capacity beyond the basic learning skills in the most efficient manner if materials and methods are prescribed which relate to the child's particular areas of interest and aptitude. Finally, since the child's current ability level may be a funtion of previous investments by parents in the form of time and materials provided at hime, parents may be expected to press for a level of classroom resources for the child which is consistent with their own previous investments; if higher previous investments are embodied in the present capabilties of the more able child, that child's parents may express a strong preference for concentrations of teacher attention and material resources in the child's classroom. And parents may pursue these interests by actively selecting, monitoring, and influencing the schooling of their most capable children.

The traditional role of parental investments in boys and girls would predict that parental preferences and behaviors may advantage boys more than girls. To the extent that boys are perceived as future primary wage earners parents may be expected to invest in boys more than in girls in a manner similar to the investment patterns which human capital theory predicts for more able, rather than less able, children in general. Recent changes in the rates of college going among women suggest that this traditional expectation favoring male children may not be as strong as it once was. It is the purpose of this study to examine the conjoint effects of child's ability and the sex of the child, along with the socioeconomic background of the family, on parental preferences and investment behavior.

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[1] Parents in poorer households may expect their children to contribute to the household work and real income as they grow older; see Schultz, pp. 6-7.

[2] See J. Alan Thomas, Resource Allocation in Classrooms (Chicago: Educational Finance and Productivity Center, Department of Education, University of Chicago, 1977), p. 61.

Methodology

The nature of the problem which I addressed in this research question and the conceptual framework I employed set the conditions for the empirical phase of this study. Predictors of variation in parental dispositions and behavior based on socioeconomic status, the academic abiltiies of children, and the sex of the child determined that I have access to information about parents and children and that my sample should include parents of varying socioeconomic background, children of varying abilities, and generally balanced numbers of boys and girls. Furthermore, since parents may have their greatest separable impact on their children's schooling in the earlier years, whereas children tend to make decisions about their school programs with increasing frequency as they grow older, I chose families for my study which had children in elementary schools. In this section I discuss these factors and their ramifications by describing the sampling procedures, data collection, and methods of analysis involved in the empirical portion of this study.

The Sample

Data which met the conditions prescribed by the basic questions and conceptual framework of this study were collected from a sample of households and classrooms included in the second phase (1979) of the project, "Resource Allocation in Classrooms and Homes," conducted at the Educational Finance and Productivity Center at the University of Chicago.[1] A total of 153 households was generated from a sample of public suburban and urban elementary schools in districts stratified according to median family income and average per-pupil expenditure.

My sample included fifth-grade children because the research project through which I gathered my data had chosen this grade level for its investigations. The fifth-grade level of schooling matched my sample needs by meeting two conditions required by my conceptualization of the study of parental control. First, I expected to find greater latitude for parental decision

[1]The supporting grant for this project was from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (NIE-P-79-0081). J. Alan Thomas and Susan S. Stodolsky were Co-Principal Investigators.

making and involvement at this intermediate level of schooling than in secondary schools where institutional procedures, such as comprehensive tracking into pre-collegiate or vocational programs, and the degree of students' self-determination concerning programs and future orientations may begin to remove parents from frequent opportunities for influencing their children's schooling. Second, I anticipated that children in intermediate grades may exhibit broader ranges in their levels of ability than children in the primary grades; such differences allow for potentially greater differentiation of curricula and instruction among and within schools, differentiation to which parents may be sensitive.

Data Collection

Most of the data for this study were gathered by means of home interviews with parents. In 82 percent of the households, the mother served as the sole respondent; in 13 percent both the mother and father participated; and in 5 percent the father was interviewed alone. In households where both parents were present for the interview the mother's responses were used in the analysis if the parents disagreed on any item. This procedure allows for the greatest possible consistency in the source of data.

Trained interviewers followed a structured questionnaire to obtain demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral information about parents. Standardized tests of reading comprehension were administered to the fifth-grade children in the study to gather information on their academic abilities.

Identification and Specification of the Variables

The conceptual model which this study is designed to test is based on eight variables. These variables divide into the following groupings: background characteristics of parents and children, parents' valuation and preferences related to their children's schooling, and parents' behaviors in selecting and influencing their children's schooling. All measures are specified below except for the sex of the child which needs no elaboration.

Background Characteristics

Socioeconomic Status of the Household

In this study I used data on the mother's and father's highest levels

of schooling (or the schooling of surrogate parents) as a proxy measure of socioeconomic status. I excluded income and occupational prestige because, consistent with most studies employing socioeconomic measures, education was strongly correlated with these status variables.[1] Furthermore, of the three commonly used dimensions of socioeconomic status, parents' education is the most proximate characteristic on which to test this study's hypotheses relating parents' dispositions and behaviors to the provision of their children's schooling. I included the education of both parents in constructing the variable since I assume that mothers and fathers share in the decision making and investments of time and money which are involved in their children's schooling.

Interviewers asked respondents to list the highest level of schooling completed by each parent in the household. For analysis of the relationship of this measure to other variables, households were grouped into three categories, "low," "middle," and "high" levels of parent education. Parents in low education households have twelve years of schooling or less. In middle education households, one or both parents have some post-secondary schooling, but neither has a four-year college degree. In high education households, one or both parents have at least a four-year college degree.

Ability of the Child

Because reading ability is essential to the development of learning in virtually all areas of content in the school program, I selected the children's scores on the reading comprehension subsection of the Science Research Associates battery of achievement tests as a proxy for general ability. The fifth-grade children in my sample were grouped for analysis according to the grade equivalency of their raw scores on the test. Children categorized as "poor" readers had scores with grade equivalencies less than fourth grade (less than 4.0). Those whom I labelled as "grade-level" readers had grade-equivalent scores ranging from the fourth grade through the first level of the seventh grade (4.0 through 7.0). "Very good" readers had scores above the base level for seventh grade (7.1 or higher).

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[1] In my sample, mother's and father's educational attainment have zero order correlations with father's occupational prestige of .60 and .78, respectively.

Parents' Valuations and Preferences Related to Schooling

This set of variables is selected and constructed to measure parents' dispositions with respect to their children's present and future schooling.

Parents' Valuation of Schooling

I argue that a good predictor of the general value parents assign to schooling in the child's life is the schooling level parents expect their child to attain. Higher levels of expected attainment may indicate that parents will have positive dispositions toward present and future investments in schooling.

During the home interview parents in my sample were asked to specify, from a list of choices, the level of schooling they expected their fifth-grade child to complete. The list included high school, two years of college or trade school, four years of college, and graduate level studies. For analysis, I dichotomized the sample between those households in which the child was expected to complete two years of college or less and those in which the child was expected to attend at least four years of college.

Parents' Preferences for Certain Features in their Children's Current Schooling

To particularize parents' dispositions toward specific features of their children's fifth-grade schooling, I selected two areas in curriculum and instruction which are central in school programs. These are the varieties of non-standard subjects parents deemed appropriate for inclusion in their child's schooling and the modes of instructional grouping they thought best for the child.

Preferences for Curricular Variety. Fifth-grade classrooms differ very little in their basic curricular programs for children. Most offer studies in elements of language, arithmetic, social studies, science, and physical education. While the specific content, instructional approach, and teaching effectiveness may vary from one classroom to another, the majority of fifth-grade children are engaged for some regular part of each day in these studies. Since schools may differ more in their inclusion of vocal music, instrumental music, art, and foreign languages, I chose to assess variations among parents in their preferences regarding these less traditional subjects in the child's program.

Parents were asked to select a point of view which would best reflect their judgment concerning the appropriateness of each subject in their fifth-grade child's curriculum. The selections available to parents were equivalent to "strongly favoring," "mildly favoring," "mildly opposing," "strongly opposing," or "standing neutral on" the inclusion of each of the subjects, vocal and instrumental music, art, and foreign languages. For the analysis, households were grouped into two categories labelled "less variety" preferred and "more variety" preferred. The categorization was based on two criteria. Households classified as preferring more curricular variety did not oppose the inclusion of any of the four subjects and strongly favored at least two of the four. Households preferring less curricular variety opposed the inclusion of one or more subjects and were strongly in favor of no more than one subject.

Preferences for Instructional Grouping. With a second preference measure I attempted to gauge parents' perceptions of the most advantageous instructional arrangements for their fifth-grade child. I hypothesized that parents may differ in the extent to which they identify some form of individualized treatment of the child as a desired mode of instruction. Interviewers presented parents with descriptions of four modes of instructional organization: two were focussed directly on the individual child (one allowing for teacher-prescribed individualization, the second allowing for student participation in setting the goals and means of learning); the third allowed for the division of the whole class into subsets of children for instructional purposes; and the fourth treated the entire classroom of children as a unit for instruction. Parents were asked to select any single mode or combination of modes

which they thought would best serve their child. Two different classifications were made of parents' responses, one with three levels and a second with two levels. The three-level categorization differentiates among households preferring (1) only individualized arrangements, (2) only whole group instruction, and (3) small group arrangements with or without some combination of the other modes. The dichotomized classification divides the sample according to preferences for "smaller group" and "larger group" instruction. The former category includes the households which prefer only individualized modes or combinations of modes exclusive of whole group instruction. The category labelled "larger group" includes all other households which listed whole group instruction as the single preference or in combination with other arrangements.

Parents' Behavior in Selecting and Influencing Their Children's Schooling

The behavior variables which this study examines are the locational choices of households and the responses of parents to opportunities for contacting their child's teachers. Both activities are intended to differentiate among households in the extent to which parents invest in their children's schooling and exercise control over it.

The Role of Schools in the Residential Location of Families

Parents were asked if any characteristics of their present school or district influenced their decisions to move to the current residential location or remain there. Immediate responses were recorded. Negative responses and generalized positive responses were then probed with the suggestion that some families move or stay because of the general reputation of the schools or for specific attributes about which they have knowledge. In this probe interviewers were instructed to list the general reputation of the elementary school, its class sizes, curricular program, and the reputation of the receiving high school as examples. Responses to such probes were also recorded. Finally, interviewers asked the parents who listed the general reputation or specific attributes of the school or district as inducing their moving or staying to cite their sources of information. In all cases parents were able to designate particular persons from whom they gained their knowledge of the schools.

For the analysis of this variable, households were categorized in two ways. The first classification scheme allows for three groupings, including those households which did not move or stay because of schools, those which were influenced by the general reputation of their present schools, and those in which parents listed one or more specific attributes. The second classification scheme dichotomizes the sample between the first category above, that is, those households which did not take schools into account, and the second and third categories, in which some aspect of the schools was included in locational decision making, combined.

Parents' Contacts with Teachers

To measure the frequency and content of parents' contacts with school personnel, interviewers charted the timing of any contacts, in person, by phone, or by written correspondence, between either parent and the child's teachers. For each contact, parents were asked to describe the person who initiated the contact, the purposes and topic of discussion, and the outcome.

Only information on contacts which occurred from the beginning of the 1979-80 school year through the month of January 1980 were used in the scoring of this variable. Two categories, "low" and "high" activity, were created on the basis of two criteria: the number of contacts and the degree of parent initiation either in arranging contacts or in seeking or transmitting information relevant to the child's academic program and performance. Initiation of the latter sort is meant to account for those parents who brought their own "agendas" to conversations with teachers, regardless of who had originally planned for the contacts. Parents who were high initiators of this type reported that they engaged in contacts with specific queries, not just to participate in an "open house" audience; such parents tended to ask for details about their children's academic performance, to ask how they might help the child with schoolwork at home, and to request specific information about the content, objectives, and expectations associated with one or another curricular subject.

Households were placed in the "low" activity category if they reported three or fewer contacts with no self-initiation in either arranging the contacts or in structuring the exchange of information during the contacts. Parents in the "high" activity category reported three or more contacts with evidence of one or both forms of self-initiation.

On the basis of the specification of variables described in this section, the hypothetical model pictured below generates the analyses described in the next section of this paper.

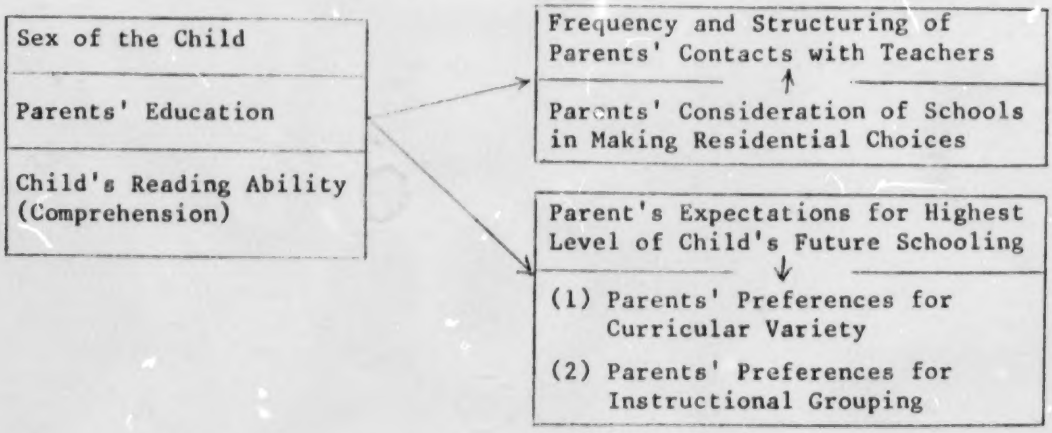
Sex of the Child
Parents' Education
Child's Reading Ability (Comprehension)
Frequency and Structuring of Parents' Contacts with Teachers
Parents' Consideration of Schools in Making Residential Choices
Parent's Expectations for Highest Level of Child's Future Schooling
(1) Parents' Preferences for Curricular Variety
(2) Parents' Preferences for Instructional Grouping

Figure 1. Hypothetical model relating sex of child, parents' education, and child's ability to parental dispositions and behavior.

Methods of Statistical Analysis

I treated all the measures in this study as ordered variables and categorized them as described in the preceding section. At a first level of analysis I cross-classified the variables in pairs and used the chi-square test of association to determine whether or not the frequencies observed in the data were significantly different from those expected under the assumption that the variables are statistically independent. Only those pairs of variables for which chi squares were large enough to meet a significance level of .05 were retained for further analysis.

Whenever two variables were significantly dependent on each other and one or both were also dependent on a third variable, a second level of analysis was undertaken. Under these circumstances I employed a second chi-square test in which the relationship between the original variables was controlled on the third variable under the assumption of conditional independence. Again, I interpreted chi squares which met the .05 level of significance as evidence that the original two variables were statistically dependent.

I adopted the .05 level of probability as a criterion of significance since the sample in this study is relatively small (approximately 150 cases),

and since small samples must exhibit very strong relationships to indicate significant dependence between variables at any commonly accepted level of probability.[1] Futher, in the three-variable contingency analysis observations were corrected for continuity whenever the expected frequency in any cell was less than ten.[2]

In a final exploratory analysis, I entered the uncategorized data on a selected set of independent variables into a discriminant analysis to assess their relative predictive impact on parent behavior.

Results of the Analyses

In this section I report the outcomes of the cross-classification (chi-square) analyses and discriminant analysis. The distributional frequencies for households in the categories within each variable are reported in table 1 on the following page. I divided the analysis of data into two parts. In the first I examined the factors which were related to parental exercise of choice, or the degree to which parents took account of schools when they located their family residence. In the second part I report the results of the analysis of parents' contacts with teachers and conclude with a composite analysis of choice and contacts within a subsample of the study.

The Role of Schools in the Residential Location of Families

Among the several factors which I predicted would relate to differences in locational decision making relative to schools, the educational background of parents carried the strongest single association, and the characteristics of children--their sex and academic abilities--were not significant predictors. Approximately 56 percent of the parents of boys located their family residences because of schools, compared to approximately 58 percent of the parents of girls (x^2 probability = .7291). The ability level of the child

[1] See, Herbert M. Blalock, Jr., Social Statistics, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), pp. 291-92.

[2] Ibid., pp. 285-86.

TABLE 1

FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSEHOLDS BY CATEGORIES IN EACH VARIABLE[a]

BACKGROUND VARIABLES

Sex of the Child

boys	81 cases	53% of the sample
girls	72	47

Parents' Education[b]

low	40 cases	27% of the sample
middle	50	34
high	58	39

Child's Reading Ability[c]

poor	30 cases	20% of the sample
grade-level	69	46
very good	51	34

PARENTAL DISPOSITIONS TOWARD SCHOOLING

Expected Future Schooling

less than B.A.	69 cases	45% of the sample
B.A. or more	84	55

Preferences for Curricular Variety

less variety preferred	81 cases	53% of the sample
more variety preferred	72	47

Preferences for Instructional Grouping

(by two categories)

smaller grouping preferred	89 cases	58% of the sample
larger grouping preferred	64	42

(by three categories)

individualized modes preferred	60 cases	39% of the sample
small group modes preferred	58	38
whole class mode preferred	35	23

[a] For the description of each variable and categorization scheme, see pages 8-13.

[b] In 5 households, the educational attainment of the father was not obtained.

[c] Three children were unavailable to take the standardized reading comprehension test.

TABLE 1, continued

PARENTAL CONTROL BEHAVIOR

Role of School in Residential Location

no account of schools	66 cases	43% of the sample
location for reputation	57	37
location for specific features	30	20

Frequency and Initiation of Parents' Contacts with Teachers

few, teacher-initiated	72 cases	47% of the sample
more, parent-initiated	81	53

was positively associated with the extent to which parents took schools into account in locating their residences but not at a high level of statistical probability (x^2 probability = .1410). The positive direction suggests that parents of more capable children located for schools more often than parents of less able children.

Parents' education was the only background variable which was strongly and significantly associated with locational behavior (see table 2). The

TABLE 2

PARENTS' EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS IN LOCATION

PARENTS' EDUCATION		SCHOOL/LOCATION No	Yes	Total
Low	No.	(24)	(16)	(40)
	%	60.0	40.0	27.0
Middle	No.	(25)	(25)	(50)
	%	50.0	50.0	33.8
High	No.	(13)	(45)	(58)
	%	22.4	77.6	39.2
Total	No.	(62)	(86)	(148)
	%	41.9	58.1	100.0

15.778 chi squares df=2 probability=.0004

higher the level of schooling completed by parents, the greater their tendency to make locational decisions based, in part, on their consideration of the schools their children would attend. Furthermore, this relationship between parents' education and location behavior appears to be bridged by the expectations parents held for their children's future schooling. More

highly educated parents tended to expect their children to complete more advanced levels of future schooling, than less well educated parents (x^2 probability=.0001), and expected future schooling was positively related to parents' locational behavior (x^2 probability=.0231). When the original association between parents' education and locational behavior was controlled on expectations for future schooling it maintained its overall strength and significance at a .01 level of probability (see table 3). Thus, the parents

TABLE 3

PARENTS' EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS IN LOCATION CONTROLLING ON EXPECTED SCHOOLING (N=148)

		EXPECTED SCHOOLING					
		Less than B.A.			More than B.A.		
PARENTS' EDUCATION		SCHOOL/LOCATION No	Yes	Total	SCHOOL/LOCATION No	Yes	Total
Low	No.	(17)	(9)	(26)	(7)	(7)	(14)
	%	65.4	34.6	38.2	50.0	50.0	17.5
Middle	No.	(13)	(15)	(28)	(12)	(10)	(22)
	%	46.4	53.6	41.2	54.5	45.5	27.5
High	No.	(4)	(10)	(14)	(9)	(35)	(44)
	%	28.6	71.4	20.6	20.5	79.5	55.0
Total	No.	(34)	(34)	(68)	(28)	(52)	(80)
	%	50.0	50.0	100.0	35.0	65.0	100.0
		5.176 chi squares df=2 prob.=.0752			9.171 chi squares df=2 prob.=.0102		

OVERALL MAXIMUM LIKELIHOOD CHI SQUARES: 14.58 DF=4 PROBABILITY < .01

who made active selections of their children's schooling were more highly educated and expected their children to complete higher levels of advanced schooling.

Just as the sex of the child was not a predictor of parents' locational behavior, this variable was also unrelated to the expectations parents held for their children's future schooling and the preferences parents had for curricular variety and instructional grouping. Approximately 55 percent of all parents expected their children to complete a four-year college degree--54 percent of the parents of boys and 56 percent

of the parents of girls (x^2 probability = .8783). Parents favored greater curricular variety more often for girls than for boys (54 percent of the parents of girls and 41 percent of the parents of boys), yet the distributions on this preference measure were not statistically significant (x^2 probability = .0968). The pattern for preferences related to instructional grouping are similar, but, again, they are not statistically significant. Approximately 64 percent of the parents of girls preferred that their daughters receive more individualized instruction; approximately 52 percent of the parents of boys held this preference (x^2 probability = .1327).

Parental education and the abilities of children appear to be the strongest predictors of parental dispositions. As reported above, parents' education held the strongest relationship with expected future schooling (x^2 probability = .0001), and child's ability was also strongly associated (x^2 probabiltiy = .0034). Yet when the relationship between parents' education and expected future schooling was controlled on child's ability its statistical significance remained high (overall x^2 probability < .01), suggesting that parents' education is the dominant predictor of the expectations parents hold for their children's future schooling.

Preferences for curricular variety were only related to parents' education. The higher the educational attainment of parents, the more curricular variety they preferred in their children's programs (x^2 probability = .0491). Child's ability had the strongest and most significant (though curvilinear) relationship with instructional preferences; parents preferred more individualized instruction for their least and most capable children, but preferred larger group instruction for "average" children (x^2 probability = .0006).

In the end, the tendency for parents to take schools into account in locating the family residence appears to depend primarily on the educational background of parents, and this association is "linked" by parents' expectations for their children's future schooling; the higher the educational attainment of parents, the more advanced schooling they expect their children to attain, and the more they exercise choice over schooling by locating the family residence with schools in mind.

Parents' Exertion of Influence through Contacts with Teachers

The second behavioral variable of interest in this study is the extent to which parents maintain frequent contact with their children's teachers, contact which is parent-initiated and structured. As with locational behavior, I hypothesized that higher levels of contact would be associated with higher parental education, higher academic ability among children, and parental dispositions favoring advanced future schooling, greater curricular variety, and more individualized and student participatory modes of instruction. I also anticipated that, if traditional patterns continue to favor boys more than girls, parents would exhibit higher levels of contact with teachers for their sons and lower levels of contact for their daughters. The findings related to this parental control variable parallel, in many respects, the results of the analysis of parental selection of school through choice of family residence, except that in these analyses the sex of the child emerges as a significant factor. The discussion of parental contacts and the sex of their children follows the analysis of other variables which proved to be important in both parental control relationships.

Preferences for curricular variety were not associated with parental influence activity, and the strongest single predictor of frequent and parent-initiated contacts with teachers was parents' educational attainment (see table 4). As with locational behavior,

TABLE 4

PARENTS' EDUCATION AND LEVELS OF INFLUENCE ACTIVITY

PARENTS' EDUCATION		INFLUENCE ACTIVITY Lower	Higher	Total
Low	No.	(27)	(13)	(40)
	%	67.5	32.5	27.0
Middle	No.	(23)	(27)	(50)
	%	46.0	54.0	33.8
High	No.	(20)	(38)	(58)
	%	34.5	65.5	39.2
Total	No.	(70)	(78)	(148)
	%	47.3	52.7	100.0

10.404 chi squares df=2 probability=.0055

parents' education appears to be linked with tendencies to contact teachers through the expectations parents hold for their children's future schooling (expectations and contacts associated at x^2 probability=.0143). However, when the association between parents' education and teacher contacts was controlled on schooling expectations, its level of strength and significance declined (overall x^2 probability >.10), suggesting that schooling expectations are related to parental contacts with teachers in a manner which is somewhat independent of their relationship with parents' education.

A second difference in results between the two behavioral variables has to do with the conjoint associations among child's ability, instructional preferences, and levels of parental contact with teachers. Child's ability was not as strongly related to teacher contacts as to locational behavior (x^2 probabilities, .4422 and .1410, respectively). Yet parental preferences for instructional grouping were associated with contacts at a strong and significant level (see table). An analysis of the relationship between

TABLE

PARENTS' PREFERENCES FOR INSTRUCTIONAL GROUPING AND LEVELS OF INFLUENCE ACTIVITY

PREFERRED GROUPING		INFLUENCE ACTIVITY Lower	Higher	Total
Smaller	No.	(35)	(53)	(88)
	%	39.8	60.2	57.5
Larger	No.	(37)	(28)	(65)
	%	56.9	43.1	42.5
Total	No.	(72)	(81)	(153)
	%	47.1	52.9	100.0

4.414 chi squares df=1 probability=.0356

instructional preferences and teacher contacts, controlling on the abilities of children, shows that parents of poorer readers tended to interact with teachers regardless of their instructional preferences, parents of "grade-level" readers were slightly more active when they preferred more individualized instruction and less active when they preferred larger group instruction, and parents of very good readers had significantly high levels of self-

initiated contacts with teachers when they preferred more individualized rather than larger group instruction (see table 6). The composite results suggest that under certain conditions parental preferences for instructional grouping have a strong effect on the influence parents exert on classroom teachers through contacts. When parents have very capable children and want classroom resources to be channelled to these children on an individual basis, they tend to be highly involved with their children's teachers. In addition, the analysis of the 26 cases which meet these two conditions reveals that in 22 of the households, one or both parents have a four-year college degree. This configuration of factors supports the conceptual hypotheses underlying this study, namely, that parental dispositions toward their children's schooling (in this case, instructional preferences) may serve to link both background characteristics--the educational level of parents and the abilities of children--to the degree of involvement which parents maintain in the classroom life of their children.

After parental educational attainment, the second strongest predictor of parental influence in the classroom is the sex of the child. As table 7 shows, approximately 60 percent of the parents of boys had

TABLE 7

SEX OF THE CHILD AND PARENTS' INFLUENCE ACTIVITY

SEX OF THE CHILD		INFLUENCE ACTIVITY Lower	Higher	Total
Boys	No.	(32)	(49)	(81)
	%	39.5	60.5	52.9
Girls	No.	(42)	(30)	(72)
	%	58.3	41.7	47.1
Total	No.	(74)	(79)	(153)
	%	48.4	51.6	100.0
5.410 chi squares		df=1	probability=.0200	

more frequent and self-initiated contacts with teachers; approximately 58 percent of the parents of girls had lower levels of contact (x^2 probability = .0200). Considering the strong relationship between the two

TABLE 6

PARENTS' PREFERENCES FOR INSTRUCTIONAL GROUPING AND LEVELS OF INFLUENCE ACTIVITY CONTROLLING ON CHILD'S READING ABILITY (N=150)

		CHILD'S READING ABILITY								
		Poor			Grade Level			Very Good		
PREFERRED GROUPING		INFLUENCE ACTIVITY Lower	Higher	Total	INFLUENCE ACTIVITY Lower	Higher	Total	INFLUENCE ACTIVITY Lower	Higher	Total
Smaller	No.	(6)	(11)	(17)	(14)	(16)	(30)	(14)	(26)	(40)
	%	35.3	64.7	56.7	46.7	53.3	43.5	35.0	65.0	78.4
Larger	No.	(6)	(7)	(13)	(22)	(17)	(39)	(8)	(3)	(11)
	%	46.2	53.8	43.3	56.4	43.6	56.5	72.7	27.3	21.6
Total	No.	(12)	(18)	(30)	(36)	(33)	(69)	(22)	(29)	(51)
	%	40.0	60.0	100.0	52.2	47.8	100.0	43.1	56.9	100.0
		.491 chi squares df=1 prob.=.4833			.702 chi squares df=1 prob.=.4021			5.004 chi squares df=1 prob.=.0253		

OVERALL MAXIMUM LIKELIHOOD CHI SQUARES: 6.06 DF=3 PROBABILITY > .10

background variables--parents' education and sex of the child--with the behavior variable, parental contacts, I cross-classified child's sex and parental contacts on the three levels of parents' education. This analysis, reported in table 8, suggests that in my sample there is a strong interactive effect between parents' education and sex of the child in parental levels of influence. Parents who completed no more than high school were generally less active in contacting teachers. However, they had low levels of contact in 52 percent of the cases when the child was a boy and in 88 percent of the cases when the child was a girl (x^2 probability = .0161). Parents who had completed either some college (middle category) or a B.A. degree (high category) showed similar sex-related behavior patterns although the associations between sex of the child and parental contacts were not statistically significant (x^2 probabilities = .0930 and .1357, respectively). The overall relationship between sex and parental contact remained statistically significant at the .05 level, and the strength of the relationship actually increased when parents' education was controlled (zero-order gamma = -.4118; first-order partial gamma = -.4983).

A futher set of contingency analyses was warranted by the possibility that the relationship between child's sex and parental influence activity might result from differences in child's ability among boys and girls in this sample. If, for example, boys in this sample were having greater academic difficulties than girls, the parents of boys might have reason to maintain higher levels of contact with teachers. Boys and girls do, in fact, have differing levels of reading comprehension in this sample. While generally similar percentages of boys and girls read at grade level, more boys than girls were categorized as "poor readers" (27 percent and 13 percent, respectively) and fewer boys than girls were categorized as "very good" readers (29 percent and 39 percent, respectively). Although these differences were not statistically significant at the .05 level, they were distinct enough to prompt a reexamination of the sex-influence relationship controlling on reading ability. The crosstabular analysis of sex and parental contacts within each category of reading ability suggests that ability is not an overriding explanatory factor in parental behavior. As table 9 shows, parents of poor readers actually maintained higher levels of contact for girls than for boys; parents of "grade-level"

TABLE 8

SEX OF CHILD AND LEVELS OF PARENTAL INFLUENCE ACTIVITY CONTROLLING ON PARENTS' EDUCATION (N=148)

SEX OF THE CHILD		PARENTS' EDUCATION: Low — INFLUENCE ACTIVITY Lower	Higher	Total	Middle — INFLUENCE ACTIVITY Lower	Higher	Total	High — INFLUENCE ACTIVITY Lower	Higher	Total
Boys	No.	(12)	(11)	(23)	(12)	(19)	(31)	(6)	(18)	(24)
	%	52.2	47.8	57.5	38.7	61.3	62.0	25.0	75.0	41.4
Girls	No.	(15)	(2)	(17)	(12)	(7)	(19)	(15)	(19)	(34)
	%	88.2	11.8	42.5	63.2	36.8	38.0	44.1	55.9	58.6
Total	No.	(27)	(13)	(40)	(24)	(26)	(50)	(21)	(37)	(58)
		67.5	32.5	100.0	48.0	52.0	100.0	36.2	63.8	100.0
		5.794 chi squares			2.821 chi squares			2.226 chi squares		
		df=1			df=1			df=1		
		prob.=.0161			prob.=.0930			prob.=.1357		

OVERALL MAXIMIMUM LIKELIHOOD CHI SQUARES: 8.13 DF=3 PROBABILITY < .05

TABLE 9

SEX OF CHILD AND LEVELS OF PARENTAL INFLUENCE ACTIVITY CONTROLLING ON CHILD'S READING ABILITY (N=150)

		CHILD'S READING ABILITY								
		Poor			Grade Level			Very Good		
SEX OF THE CHILD		INFLUENCE ACTIVITY Lower	Higher	Total	INFLUENCE ACTIVITY Lower	Higher	Total	INFLUENCE ACTIVITY Lower	Higher	Total
Boys	No.	(10)	(11)	(21)	(15)	(20)	(35)	(5)	(18)	(23)
	%	47.6	52.4	70.0	42.9	57.1	50.7	21.7	78.3	45.1
Girls	No.	(2)	(7)	(9)	(22)	(12)	(34)	(18)	(10)	(28)
	%	22.2	77.8	30.0	64.7	35.3	49.3	64.3	35.7	54.9
Total	No.	(12)	(18)	(30)	(37)	(32)	(69)	(23)	(28)	(51)
	%	40.0	60.0	100.0	53.6	46.4	100.0	45.1	54.9	100.0
		1.693 chi squares			3.311 chi squares			9.232 chi squares		
		df=1			df=1			df=1		
		prob.=.1932			prob.=.0688			prob.=.0024		

OVERALL MAXIMUM LIKELIHOOD CHI SQUARES: 10.24 DF=3 PROBABILITY < .05

readers were more active when the child was a boy; and parents of very good readers had considerably higher levels of contact for boys than for girls. These results suggest that parents may intervene more often on behalf of girls when the child is perceived as deficient in basic skills but may support and reinforce the schooling of their children much more frequently when the able child is a boy rather than a girl.

In summary, it appears that the influence activity of parents may depend on a variety of factors. Among the background variables, parents' education and the sex of the child are the strongest predictors of the frequency and self-initiation of parents' contacts with teachers. In addition, the analytical outcomes suggest that in this sample there are complex conjoint effects among parents' education, the sex of the child, and the reading ability of the child which may determine the level of influence the parents exert on the classroom. When preferences are also taken into account, the child's ability, expected future schooling, and parental preferences for instructional grouping all play a role in distinguishing among the varying levels of parental contacts with teachers.

Discriminant Function Analysis of A Subsample

In a final analysis I attempted to assess the effects of the strongest independent variables on the general control behavior of parents over their children's schooling. For this analysis I categorized each household according to its locational and contact behaviors combined. Each household fell into one of four categories: high on both locational and contact behavior; low on both behaviors; high on location but low on contact; or high on contact but low on location. I then isolated the extreme categories (high on both, low on both) and used discriminant analysis to see which variables, including parents' education, child's ability, sex of the child, and schooling expectations, appear to discriminate best between a household's placement in one or the other extreme category.

In my sample, 81 of the 153 households were categorized as either high or low on both dependent variables, and among the 81 cases, 78 had

relevant data on all variables in the analysis. This subsample then constitutes roughly 50 percent of the total. For computational purposes I used all predictor variables in their raw, continuous form rather than their categorized forms. Thus, I entered both mother's and father's actual years of schooling completed, the raw reading score the child had attained on the comprehension test, and the specific number of years of schooling parents expected their child to complete. These variables, along with the sex of the child, were entered in a step-wise manner such that only those variables which added significantly to the discrimination between behavioral groups were included in the analysis. The governing criterion in this process was the F score for Wilks' Lambda.[1]

As table 10 shows, all variables except the child's reading ability contributed to the discrimination between cases categorized in the high and low behavioral classifications. More important, the two most significant variables in this analysis were mother's education and the sex of the child. In addition, this analysis suggests that approximately 77 percent of these 78 cases were in the "correct" classification according to the composite clusterings of cases around the independent variables entered.

TABLE 10

SUMMARY TABLE OF THE DISCRIMINANT FUNCTION ANALYSIS OF A SUBSAMPLE ON LOCATIONAL AND CONTACT BEHAVIOR

Number of Cases		
Group 1 (high on both behaviors)	45	
Group 2 (low on both behaviors)	33	
Step Entered	**Wilks' Lambda**	**Significance**
1 Mother's Education	.7665	.0001
2 Sex of Child	.6431	.0001
3 Expected Schooling	.6177	.0001
4 Father's Education	.5994	.0001

Functions=1
Eigenvalue: .66847
Canonical Correlation: .6330
Wilks' Lambda: .5934
Chi Squares: 37.369
Degrees of Freedom: 4
Significance: .0001

Conclusions and Implications

The underlying question of concern in this study is the matter of parental control over the schooling their children receive. For over a decade, critics have been less than sanguine about the extent to which parents can influence their children's schooling, particularly in the public school systems. Public choice theorists decry the power which teachers and administrators can wield given their control of information and the fiscal independence which derives from the tax basis of income for the schools. Political scientists have long documented the distinctly unrepresentative characteristics of school board members compared to their constituents, the tendency of boards to acquiesce to central administrators, and the generally low level of citizen participation in school referenda and elections. These factors have fueled a growing interest in alternative forms of school finance and governance in pre-collegiate schooling. Some advocates of vouchers and tuition tax credits claim that direct mechanisms for greater parental control will stand to benefit those most often excluded from the policy making process--racial minorities and the poor. Few research have even questioned, much less studied, the control which parents may exercise differentially for boys and girls regardless of racial or socioeconomic background.

This research was undertaken to examine patterns of parental control as it is actually exercised in public elementary schools today. The guiding premise in this work is that, at least to some extent, current patterns of behavior and preferences will persist regardless of the fiscal and political structures overlayed on educational institutions. In particular, this study investigates the possible effects of parental and child characteristics on parental control behavior, introducing the factor of the child's sex along with the more traditional background characteristics such as family socioeconomic status and children's abilities.

If the rationale for a more competitive system of schooling, less monopolized by public providers and more amenable to parental choice, includes an expectation that financially and politically disadvantaged parents will resemble other parents in their involvement in decision making concerning their children's schooling, this study questions the

reasonableness of the more extreme claims. And the outcomes of this study also suggest that if the differential treatment of boys and girls is ignored, we must be concerned about the possibility of sex inequities, along with social inequities, which may persist in the "micro-economic" behavior of parents either under current or alternative forms of school finance and governance. Three aspects of the results of this study are worth highlighting.

First, the households in this sample varied considerably in the preferences for curricular and instructional characteristics of schooling, and these dispositions were strongly related to the socioeconomic status of parents. Preferences for curricular variety were associated with the educational background of parents; the higher the parents' own educational attainment, the greater their interst in opportunities for their children to study music, art, and foreign languages. If it turned out that, in a competitive market in schooling, children of more highly educated parents were mainly grouped in schools offering wider curricular variety, the resulting patterns of social segregation might not differ greatly from those which presently exist in public and private schools.[1]

A second significant result in this study concerns the relationship of parents' instructional preferences and their control behavior related to their children's schooling. Households responded with widely varying interests in individualized instruction and instruction which permits children to make learning decisions in the classroom. The abilities of children, along with their parents' educational background, tended to determine instructional preferences, and those parents who desired more individualized and participatory instruction were more likely to make frequent, self-initiated contacts with teachers. These findings may help to explicate, to some extent, the less empirical observations of those who relate school and classroom "climate" to the socioeconomic status of the community in which the school is located. For example, Bowles and Gintis extrapolated on Kohn's[2] findings of relationships

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[2]Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contraditions of Economic Life (New York: Basic Books, 1976); Kohn, Class and Conformity.

[1]Christopher Jencks et al. make a similar prediction in, Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and School in America (New York: Basic Books, 1972; New York: Harper and Row, Harper Colophon Books, 1973), p. 53.

between social class and the orientation of parents toward conformity to authority versus self-direction, to suggest that the nature of the work place of parents is congruent with the nature of the schools their children attend. If parents have little job security and are treated in an arbitrary manner when they are working, the schools their children attend will be chaotic and repressive. The children of parents who have stable but rule-structured and subordinate positions of work will find themselves in schools which allow for little independent decisions making. And if parents are in work situations where they exercise independent judgment much of the time, their children will have a larger role in making decisions about what and how they will study and will have more behavioral latitude in the classroom. The implication of the Bowles and Gintis argument is that children are prepared to assume jobs with the same kinds of conformity/self-direction conditions under which their parents work. This implication aside, the relationship between parents' education, instructional preferences, and influence behavior may give us some leads concerning more direct linkages between communities and their schools.

Finally, this study suggests that we be cognizant of possible sex as well as social inequities which may result from the transfer of educational values between parents and children. To the extent that future educational and occupational opportunities accumulate from the investments in children's schooling from the primary grades upward, patterns of under-investment in the schooling of girls, as compared to boys, may have limiting effects which only become apparent in the high school years when previous academic achievement leads to the segregations of students into programs or tracks. The results of this study suggest that parents are more frequent and assertive in their contacts with teachers when their children are boys than when their children are girls. Further, this pattern is more pronounced among less well educated parents than among better educated parents. When we look at these patterns among different categories of child's ability, we find that parents are significantly more involved in the schooling of their more able boys than in the schooling of their more able girls. Thus, to the extent that the findings based on this rather small sample may be generalized, the greatest benefits of parental support and involvement

appear to accrue to boys who have higher academic capabilties and whose parents have higher educational attainments. We know that educational expectations for boys and girls, although changing, have generally favored boys; we also know that future occupational possibilities, again in flux, have generally limited the opportunities of girls. We may not be paying enough attention, however, to the investment behavior of parents in the early schooling years when their support and involvement can have a significant formative impact on the child's future prospects.

In the end, my findings may sustain the old argument that the best potential intellectual development of some children may require the intervention of social agencies, particularly the schools, in loco parentis, when parents do not or cannot actively exercise their options to control their children's schooling or would do so in such a way as to limit the development of their children's capacities.[1] An alternative approach may involve a broader definition of parents' roles in their children's schooling. For example, parents might be brought into their children's schools and classrooms to asist teachers and observe instructional techniques applicable at home. They might also be alerted to the possibility that their behavior may, at times, encourage the success of boys and disregard the classroom life of girls.

The balance in this equation between parental and professional influence on children's schooling and development will depend on the relative importance which educators place on the controlling interests of parents and the professional capacities of teachers and administrators to diagnose children's needs and potentials and to support the best development of each child. This perplexity will always be a factor in the schooling of children.

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[1]For an interesting presentation of economic arguments for legal sanctions requiring parents to invest optimally in their children or to allow the state to intervene, see Richard A. Posner, Economic Analysis of Law, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), pp. 103-104.